

El Salvador

El 26 de octubre - el 7 de noviembre, 2018.

Hallelujah! After 4 1/2 years I was off on my 21st Habitat for Humanity build. The team from my church was enthusiastic, energetic, curious and creative. There was a depth of musical talent and it was noted that at home our church choir was noticeably depleted. For the first time I was compared to Mary Poppins and never before had Jean and I had a song written for us. In varying stages of retirement, the 10 of us were: 3 engineers, 2 nurses, 2 social workers, 1 United church minister, 1 fitness instructor and 1 teacher. For 6 of them it was the first Salvadoran experience. When Avianca announced pre-boarding for those over 60, we were all eligible! Again I was blessed that my friend Jean and I could plan the trip together and share leadership responsibilities. This, however was the first time that the danger in El Salvador was so close to hand as there had been 2 recent murders in Tierra Nueva, our sister community of 18 families. I have been visiting the folks over the last 22 years so it would have been extremely disappointing for me and the others who are drawn to this experience by our close connection to the families if we had not been able to visit them. They had been preparing for our visit for months.



It was decided by the community and FUNDAHMER, the organization that continues to support them that we would be safe and we were. Within 12 hours of arriving we were heading to the Pacific coast. We transferred to 2 pick ups for the 60 minutes, 14 Km of jostling along the dried up riverbed of a track. [The second truck had to be driven directly to the mechanic upon delivering us back from our visit] I sat beside Edgardo, the 'chofer' of the 8 yr.old Mitsubishi truck. For him it was to be the 3rd such gruelling return trip in 24 hours as he had been taking out supplies for the celebration of our community's 23 years on the land and 2 spectacular birthday cakes to surprise Jean on her special day. He is a big man, as gentle with the truck and passengers perched in the open back as he is light on his feet when he has waltzed in the past and line danced this year. As we crept along I asked what he would do on Sunday, his day off. He answered he would be attending church and leading a youth and a dads' group. He believes this keeps fathers and children connected and safer as the notorious gang leadership is smart at recruiting youth hanging out on the streets. We both laughed when he hefted my backpack, asking if I had rocks in it. In fact I did! I brought 3 Aboriginal math games to do with the children, so I was carrying Crescent Beach stones and shells.

Approaching the community we piled out of the trucks when met by musicians and some of our friends along the road. They lead our procession that turned into the festively decorated community gathering space. Looking around we saw red and white streamers and balloons, a large welcome poster and birthday greeting, photos and cards we have sent over the years and shy smiles from both adults and children. By open fires a team of women were making tortillas, deep fried chicken, fresh vegetables and rice for this gathering of 100 of us including guests from neighbouring communities who could have walked an hour to get here. Jean declared this to be her biggest birthday party ever!

On Sunday we joined up with *Habitat para la Humanidad* El Salvador and were transported by mini bus to meet the family on whose home we will be working. Alejandra is a vibrant 23 yr old, 6 months pregnant. She and her partner Jose Manuel, a dental assistant, will move into the small, attractive 5 room, cement block home about the time the baby is due. They will pay \$188/month for 10 years. They currently live with her Mom, Sylvia, sister Grecia [8 yrs] and cousin Helen [14 yrs]. Alejandra is one of 36 women and their families over the last 18 months to benefit from Habitat El Salvador's commitment to be proactive in guaranteeing a woman's right to own property and to take out a loan in her own name. Some loans were partially subsidized. Actual house building constitutes 10% of the projects, the others 90% are home improvements such as adding a second story or replacing a roof. In this country where 8 of every 10 Salvadorans live in inadequate conditions and 3 of every 10 live in extreme poverty the government does not have a Ministry of Housing. Habitat is the service delivery agency. Since 1992, 33,000 projects have been accomplished.

We were taken to a hostel in *Concepcion de Ataco*, our home base for the week we were with Habitat. It is nestled in hillsides blanketed with coffee bushes. The town was sleepy during the week but busy with Salvadoran families and students visiting on the weekends. While out for a stroll you could buy anything from luscious fruit to Mayan hand woven scarves, to handmade wood toys to batteries from

vendors perched on sidewalks in front of the shops selling candles, groceries or embroidered clothing. You could tour the town seated in a metal box mounted on a vintage minibus or on one of 3 seats perched in the sole of a fluorescent pink, motorized, 8ft tall high heeled shoe! *Ataco* is known for its brilliantly coloured murals painted on shops and homes. The vivid scenes depict life in a rural town. Many incorporated sayings like 'The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams' Eleanor Roosevelt or 'No calm sea made a sailor an expert', 'Save the Earth, it is the only planet with beer' and 'God has an image; the faces of the poor and oppressed.'

Our worksite in *San Jose de Majada* was 40 minutes away in our mini bus. We departed around 8 each morning and returned after 4. The hillsides and volcanoes en route were a visual feast. While working side by side we do get to know the 3 workers. Santos is our *jefe*. He is 34 yrs and a Habitat employee for 8 years. He is one of 7 children, all living near their parents. This is exceptional, for in a country of 6.4 million, 21% of households are supported by family working outside the country. In 9 months this year, \$4 billion was received. With 151,000 Salvadorans pending deportation from the US many families may become economically vulnerable.

I especially enjoy making folks laugh with my Spanish silliness, though I am reminded to not get overconfident when I notice Santos translating my Spanish into something his assistant Jose understands. That's OK as then all of us are laughing. One lunch he started telling us how we are a fine team. I translated that but he continued with more than I could translate, so thinking fast I summarized.....so what you are saying is "you love us". He agreed and again there was group laughter. I had him repeat it to Emilio, who has been our Habitat liaison the last few times. It doesn't hurt to have good references in this business. **Alyth** who was relentless in search of cold drinks, used this phrase to describe our team at work. 'Strong as bull, not cute like tractor.' It still makes me giggle.

Santos instructed us and gave us important work to do like filling in between the blocks and pointing. We moved earth by wheelbarrow or bucket and set up a percussion beat with tampers made from gallon cans filled with concrete and a branch to hold onto. Our **Jo Ellen** reported she could feel our tamping from 30 metres away. Using the volcano technique we made a variety of mixes with different ratios of cement, stones, sand, water. Rosbeli, Alejandra's grandfather, is doing the sweat equity for the family. At age 65 he moved 13 blocks in a wheelbarrow to my 3!



to my 3! We are noticed in this small town, likely because of our Habitat sign and our large Canada flag. Sylvia de Rosa, walking by, stopped to chat and told us her nephew is a butcher in Vancouver. Our **Warren** helped the local economy by purchasing from the mauve gingham aproned lady who carried a tray of sweet bread and donuts on her head when she passed by our work site.

Looking in from the dirt road, at the back perimeter of the worksite a 2 story red brick wall loomed over us. On the left side the neighbour had built a wall of 13 rows of concrete blocks topped by razor wire. The right side was bordered by simple barbed wire held up by cut branches that have been placed there and happily sprouted, and vines grow entwined. Looking up to stretch our backs we saw a volcano in the distance and most days, blue sky. On Thursday when Santos said there would be a downpour in 10 minutes the sky did not look menacing, but he was right. You could hear the rain approaching us as the sound of its drumming on the metal roofs got closer and closer.

Friday was a half day as we had a *despedida*/going away party in the afternoon. Yet another tasty hot lunch arrived at the worksite, prepared 40 minutes away and delivered by Wendy, perched on the back of a motorcycle. Including snacks we were very well fed, 5 times a day! Our team said we should mention that in our spiel for the next brigade. We exchanged *recuerdos*/souvenirs with the family and the work crew. Many *fotos* were taken and thoughtful words shared. It has become a tradition for us to leave a cement garden stone for the family. This one had the Habitat logo, a toonie, a pewter cross and a Canada pin inset.

That morning en route to work we had stopped to choose flowers from vendors lining the route. We took bouquets to the cemetery so we could join our family and the community in celebrating *Día de los Difuntos*/Day of the Dead. It would take more words than I know to paint for you the tapestry of the cemetery— vibrant floral displays, families visiting or eating or painting cement stones and children playing tag. **Elisabeth**, our team's haiku *aficionada*, enchanted us with her images and coached me with this:

*Day of the Dead
families picnic on gravestones
adorned in technicolour.*

Our **John** had us looking at soil, volcanic ash, etc by sharing his knowledge from Earth Sciences. Displaying another talent, he repaired a shelf at FUNDAHMER with scraps of wood he found. When she wasn't being one of our star workers, **Teri** taught herself how to weave intricate friendship bracelets so she could teach others. She and John, as parents of Ian and Sean from our youth brigade of 2014, became the first entire family to travel with us. **Joy** in her turquoise cowgirl hat had the stamina and grace to waltz in hiking boots on uneven dirt. She, **Elisabeth** and Edgardo were enthusiastic line dancers the afternoon we led activities in our return visit to *Tierra Nueva*. There was hilarity during **Janice's** scarf juggling instruction. Our traditional pancake and sausage [with the very popular Canadian maple syrup] luncheon event was once again enthusiastically received by our family, the children and adults of Tierra Nueva.

Also traditional is a walk along the dirt road to visit the family homes. We saw healthy lime trees, the chickens, the spider web of wires hanging from the few shared hydro poles. The 2 water sites are looking desperately dry. My Salvadoran granddaughter, Ana Luz, was our guide. I met her 22 years ago. She was not attending school. When she received donated shoes, she returned to Gr 3 at age 13. We had thought she was not attending because her Mom, Edit, needed her to help on the land, but she had thought one needed to wear shoes to school. Now at 35, Ana Luz is the Mom of 3 fine children, the organizer for the health project, a leader of the community and a proud keeper of 8 beehives. In fact when I was about to turn back from the tour to start making pancakes, she would not let me. She was determined I would see her bees. She is doing all this without the support of her best friend and sister in law, my other granddaughter, Margarita. She has disappeared with her 2 children and perhaps her partner who is known to have committed one of the murders. The hug I received from Ana Luz the last visit was so strong I literally could not breathe. She is a treasure. I marvel at how much talent the community would have lost had it not been for the gift of the shoes.

As well as bringing bins of vitamins, school and dental supplies for Tierra Nueva we brought medical supplies for Dr Alexander Ramos Lopez. I first met him 10 years ago. He has been an attentive volunteer doctor to 3 of our brigades to his town, *Zacatecoluca*. [keep track of that name for later reference]. He would drop in on us before and after his 12 hour shifts at the local public clinic. I am proud to announce that when my friend, who calls me his big sister, came to visit us at our worksite he came as President of Habitat El Salvador. He put on a work shirt and joined in with us that morning.

Over the years I have noticed that every visit becomes more and more about the people. I do find satisfaction in the physical work and the rewards of that and I welcome experiencing new locales, but it is the people who feed my soul. Foremost is the opportunity to renew friendship with the folks at FUNDAHMER and the families in Tierra Nueva. I have seen children grow into young adult students or farmers and dedicated friends who continue the struggle to support the poorest of the poor.

It is humbling to meet the talented young people who have found a way to remain in their country, creating possibilities for a hopeful future. We were honoured to meet several. Tatiana from Habitat, a capable, congenial young woman was with us at work and play. She has 4 sisters, 1 brother. She learned her excellent English skills having earned a scholarship to study locally. Her goal is to attend university. She told us Canada was the country she wanted to visit to experience the climate and to see the coloured fall leaves. By chance I had 2 red maple leaves I had dried to bring for whomever. I was delighted to find the perfect recipient.

Laura, of FUNDAHMER, also earned a scholarship to study English. She is one of 6 girls in her family. She hopes one day to study Psychology. Like Laura, Juan Carlos and his family lived in a FUNDAHMER supported community. His story is dramatically different. On his own he left home and was smuggled into the US at age 14. He worked in a restaurant and studied English on his half day off. He married an American and they have 2 children. Their drywall business is not in his name. After 15 years in the US, when we met him he had only been back in El Salvador 2 weeks. He had returned in order to see his Great grandmother and to see if there could be a good life there for his family. We do not know for sure if he is pre-empting being deported. With no previous experience, he did an outstanding job as our translator. He was not in the country in 2005 the year our group had to seek shelter after we were robbed at *machete* point while sightseeing on a historic, remote hilltop. We felt we needed to move out of the very small town where we were so very visible. His Mother's community fed and sheltered 10 strangers overnight on very little notice. Like other Salvadorans we have met he was surprised that we were 'that group'. There are Tourist Police now at such locations.

Each night, wherever we are, before heading to bed [much earlier than we do at home] we gather to do a reflection. We each take a turn to create the opportunity to share our thoughts, experience of the day or do an activity. My night I read from Richard Wagamese's Embers, one Ojibway's Meditation. He wrote of building community and looking for at least one moment of real contact at the heart of every day. That evening, Juan Carlos made it possible for the Spanish-English sharing between Anita, [we call each other sisters] with her 3 young adult children and my friend Armando with 2 of his daughters and our group to make genuine contact and to share communion offered by our **Janice** using a tortilla and wine. With his translating we were able to go well beyond the 'Hola, Como estas?'

Another highlight for me was the overnight visit to the beach. The one hour playing in the waves was exhilarating. We ate all our meals outside. There we met a Habitat group from Portland. In San Salvador we visited my favourite church, *El Rosario* where one stands inside a rainbow arch. The height is 23 m. The vault is formed by rows of rectangles of multicoloured stained glass and cement. There is no interior support. The stations of the cross are simple but elegant of iron rods and cement. Then there were the museums, the craft market, the dynamic fish market on the pier at *La Libertad*, the world Heritage site of domestic Mayan ruins, the sunsets.....

Now about Mary Poppins. It seems that after 21 brigades I have developed a formidable packing list. Truth be told I was one of the few who travelled weighed down with 2 full luggage bags. Maybe it was the maple leaves, the tictacs with tiny Canada flags, the BC pins, the Crescent Beach stones. I did smile often to be able to produce a desired item from my not quite bottomless bags. This song written and performed by our group for Jean and I on the last evening was a surprise and a generous gift.

*Song for El Salvador Viaje 2018
(to the tune of Supercalifragalistic)*

*On the bus and down the road to Zacatecoluca,
Bouncing in the truck to see friends in Tierra Nueva,
Moving bloques, digging dirt in San Jose Majada
On the bus and down the road to Zacatecoluca.*

*Mary Poppins with her bag of everything we needed,
Safety pins and masking tape, scissors, games and paper,
Jean the banker with her vault securing our possessions,
Herding cats at all our stops and planning our agenda.*

*Jefe Jean and Jefe Cheryl planning all logistics
FUNDAHMER hosting us with lots of food to feed us,
Sonsonate Habitat; Concepcion de Ataco,
Our visit to El Salvador has really been Perfecto!*